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# In Pursuit of the Perfect Classroom

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## About the Author

Claire Lutkewitte is currently teaching COMP 1500 and Advanced Composition for the Division of Humanities. She is also completing her doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition. Her research interests include: first-year writing pedagogy, computers and digital writing, and multimodal composition.

## In Pursuit of the Perfect Classroom

by Claire Lutkewitte

Like most teachers, I have taught in a variety of classrooms, from traditional classrooms with rows of desks facing the front chalkboard to laptop computer classrooms with rows of tables facing a teacher's station. To be successful teachers, we must be able to adapt and make do with the classrooms we are assigned. Even when we have a say in which classroom we teach in, rarely can we influence how that classroom is designed. Though many institutions allow teachers to request specific classrooms, the final decisions as to where instructors teach can be complicated and are usually left to others in the university hierarchy: administrators, department heads, building supervisors, technology departments, and so forth.

I have spent the last five years teaching writing in all sorts of computer classrooms. Because I feel teaching writing in a computer classroom is important, I requested that I teach in one during my first semester at Nova Southeastern University, and was thrilled when my request was granted. So, as I was getting ready to teach at NSU for the first time in the fall of 2009, I kept in mind the different types of computer classroom environments I might be working in and, like every other teacher, prepared my syllabi accordingly. I was assigned a computer classroom, and as my first semester got underway, I transitioned, adapted, and made do with what I had. And, for the most part, it worked out.

At the conclusion of my first semester, I have reached a brief moment when I can pause and reflect on my experiences. Overall, I feel my first semester went smoothly, despite a few glitches. I enjoyed meeting fellow colleagues, working with students, and getting to know the campus. As a new member of the NSU community, in a way, I was able to relate to the incoming freshmen in more ways than one, whether that was getting lost trying to find the Mailman building or spending way too much time trying to find the right place to park so as not to get a ticket.

As I prepare now for my second semester and plan my daily classroom activities for my four classes, I cannot help but think back to my experiences teaching in different classrooms at other universities and to a series of pedagogical decisions that I made this past fall at NSU. I was fortunate enough to be able to teach in the DeSantis Building, a fairly new building with well-appointed classrooms. Likewise, I was fortunate enough to have been assigned room 3029, a computer classroom, for all four of my composition classes.



*Figure 1: A view from the teacher's station in DeSantis room 3029.*

DeSantis room 3029 was almost identical to the first computer classroom I ever taught in. From one side of the classroom, four rows of computer tables jet out from one wall opposite the classroom doors. The teacher's station is in a corner in the front of the room next to the white board and screen. On the other side of the room, two tables house one printer for the entire classroom. In the back of the room is another white board and door. Here is a rough sketch of room 3029's layout:

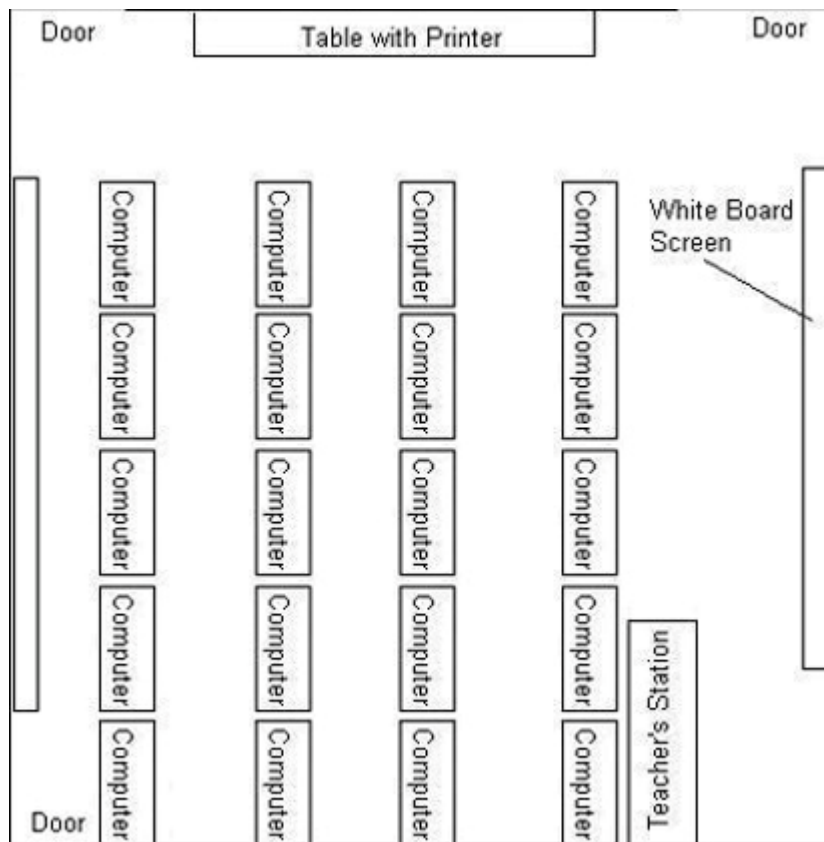


Figure 2: Sketch of DeSantis Room 3029

As evident in the sketch above, the students' computer stations all face the front where the white board and teacher's station are located. Therefore, students' attention is naturally drawn to the front of the room. While this may be an ideal classroom for professors who lecture on a daily basis, I cannot say for sure. Since I tend to promote more active learning in my classes, I do not spend a lot of time lecturing. Rather, students in my classes *act*; they discuss their writing, work with a peer on a draft, complete a group projects and activities, or participate in freewriting activities. So, just as I have done in the past, I spent a good deal of my time moving to and from the back of the room this past fall semester to make sure that my students were able to act. The layout of the room, however, severely limited where I was able to walk. In fact, I think there might even be a worn path in the shape of an "L" on the carpet in that room for all those treks I made throughout the semester to the back of the room.

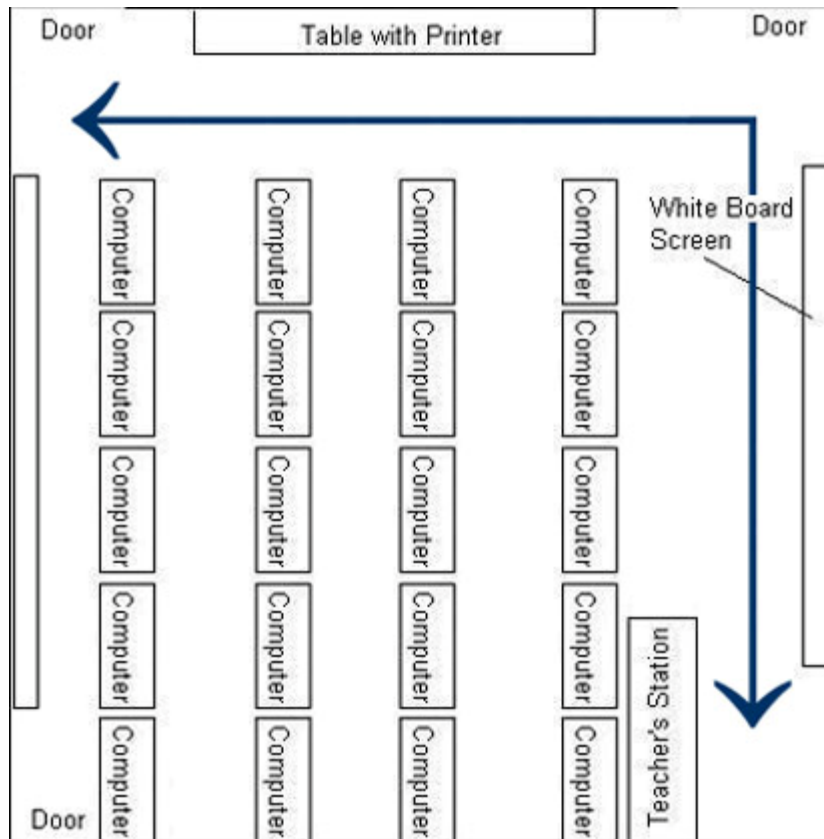


Figure 3: Walking Path in DeSantis Room 3029

Having taught in a similar environment before, I noticed this “L” shaped path the very first week of classes, and began to adapt my teaching accordingly. For example, since the majority of students in my classes were freshmen, I knew I needed to introduce them to WebCT since I planned to use it often during the semester. As I was demonstrating how to find documents and how to submit assignments on WebCT on the big screen in the front of the classroom, I realized that I could not see my students’ computer screens. So, after I explained a few directions, I’d hurry to the back of the room where I would be able to see if everyone had made it to the right screen or not. If “yes,” great. I would hurry to the front of the room to the teacher’s station and move on to the next set of instructions and demonstrations.

If the answer, however, was “no,” I faced another challenge. If the student’s computer was in the back of the room and I could go to the back of the room and see exactly where the student was and discuss what he/she needed to do next. If the student’s computer was in the front of the room and it was difficult to see where the student was, I would either ask a neighbor to help out or I would move closer by either going to the front of the room and awkwardly leaning over the table to get a better glimpse of the computer screen, or I would do the dreaded “weave-and-squeeze” to move behind the other students sitting in that row to get to the student in trouble.

While this is just one small example of the difficulties a computer classroom like room 3029 poses, it reflects a situation instructors like me face on a daily basis. And, it made me more aware of how and why classroom design influences my pedagogy. This type of classroom design does not allow for much movement, much action, by teachers or by students. For instance, not

only does a teacher have difficulty in moving next to a student to provide the student with individual attention, but students also have difficulty moving to the teacher's station, to one of the white boards at the front and back of the room, or to other students. Nor does a room like 3029 allow for the pedagogical practices (group activities, peer review, discussions, and so forth) that I feel are necessary in helping students learn to write. Rather, it facilitates an environment that is meant for lecturing.

One of the reasons I was attracted to NSU was its low course caps for writing classes. These caps match the [suggestion](#) of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that writing classes should be limited to 15 students. NSU's website recognizes the advantages of smaller class sizes by saying that students are given "[more personal attention from faculty](#)," "[a greater opportunity to connect with other bright students](#)," and "[chances for active participation](#)." As an instructor, I tried to provide all of these. Doing so, though, proved difficult at times because of room 3029's design.

When I think of the teaching methods touted by NSU's website, I think about collaborative writing activities in the classroom. After all, collaboration in the writing classroom has been well supported by many scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition: Kenneth Bruffee, Sheryl I. Fontaine, Susan M. Hunter, Lisa Ede, and Andrea Lunsford, just to name a few. As the semester went on, I realized that some of the collaborative activities I had planned to do would probably be difficult given the design of the classroom. For example, in one activity, I like to divide the class into three groups with five students per group. Finding areas in the classroom where one group of five students could work together without being so close to another group of five students involved a lot of strategic maneuvering between chairs and tables. A few students crammed together in order to avoid having to peer between or over computer monitors. However, since computer rows were so close, students still had to turn the computer screen back and forth so that everyone had a chance to read the group's work. As a result, the activity took a little longer than expected.

Even though group activities were difficult in Room 3029, I did not avoid them nor did I request the use of a non-computer classroom for these specific activities since students needed computers. Whether or not computers should be in the writing classroom is not a new debate. See for example the work of Cynthia Selfe, Anne Wysocki, and Cheryl Ball. I believe as do these and many other scholars that digital writing needs to be informed by what writing instructors know about rhetoric and the rhetorical strategies needed to make writing successful. Therefore, I also believe as do these and many other scholars that face-to-face pedagogy and computer classrooms can work together as long as the classroom design allows for it. In the five years I have taught writing, I have taught in one computer classroom that allowed for both. While like room 3029 this room, too, had problems, it was more conducive to collaborative activities and made for smoother instruction simply because it allowed for movement and greater access to proximity among students and teacher. Below is a sketch of that classroom.



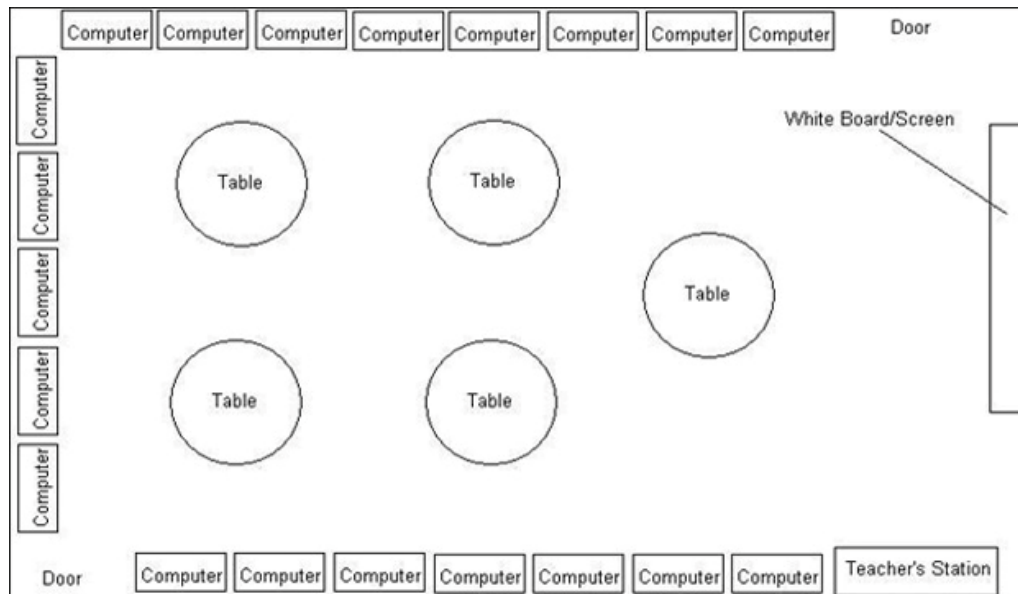


Figure 4: Sketch of a Classroom More Conducive to Collaborative Activities

Although I'm aware that a classroom should be just one of the places in a network of learning places that students work within, ideally, every classroom should be designed around the interactions that facilitate engaged learning, rather than our pedagogies being designed around the technologies and layout that already exist there. For writing classes, good design means computer labs in which students and teachers can collaborate as well as work one-on-one. I agree with Catherine Gouge when she writes that a program's "modes of delivery should reflect the values espoused by the program" (342). In other words, writing program goals, as well as the goals of a school that promotes collaborative activities, should shape the design of the writing classroom accordingly. These goals should not have to be compromised or changed in order to work around existing classroom designs.

I realize that part of the reason instructors often do not get much of a say in how classrooms are designed is that instructors from many different departments share these spaces. Issues of technology, money, power, resources, available class space, time, the number of classes, and the number of faculty all come into play when classrooms are assigned. Ultimately, these factors play a part in a very large infrastructure. I am reminded here of Stuart Selber's article, "Institutional Dimensions of Academic Computing," in which he makes a call for writing instructors to not just be aware of, but be more involved in, "the technosocial scenes unfolding on their campuses" (13). He makes a strong case that writing departments should be involved in technological decisions that have to do with classroom design since such decisions have major effects on student learning. However, working with a vast infrastructure that involves many people and departments is not a simple task.

I would like to offer two short anecdotes to demonstrate this point. As I mentioned earlier, for the most part, my first semester went smoothly. Nonetheless, I was presented with two reoccurring problems. First, since I was the first instructor of the day to use room 3029, it was often locked before I arrived. If the security guard who was assigned to the DeSantis building

was on duty, he would unlock the classroom prior to the start of my first class. But, if he was not on duty, the classroom would not be unlocked prior to my first class. As a new professor, I wasn't sure initially who was responsible for locking and unlocking this classroom. The first time the classroom was locked at the start of my class, I walked downstairs to the front desk to inquire about a key. The receptionist informed me that she would call a security guard to come to the DeSantis building and unlock the classroom while my class and I waited in the hallway. This worked for the majority of the time as a security guard would magically appear with a key. However, on occasion, we would wait, sometimes fifteen minutes, until I gave up on room 3029 and confiscated a nearby empty non-computer classroom. With a quick adjustment in the day's activities, the class would get underway. Each time a new security guard did arrive to unlock the door, though, I made sure to ask why the classroom was not unlocked. I got different responses from different people, mostly informing me that it had not been on the schedule, or I should contact the person upstairs on the fourth floor, although they never said who that person was. I then talked to a few more people in and out of my department. And, finally, after sending out emails and phone calls, the door was never locked again at the start of my classes.

The second problem involved the computers in the classroom. For the first half of the semester, the majority of the computers in the classroom would not allow students to access Word documents that I had posted on WebCT due to security settings placed on the computers. Since I, as well as those students who had laptops, could download the documents, we made do with what worked and avoided using the computers in the classroom to download Word documents. But, I did not give up trying to solve the problem. As a new faculty member, I assumed that the computer classroom in the DeSantis building was not the only one of its kind and that I would be able to find someone in the building to help me out with the computers. Well, it was not that simple. Each time this problem occurred, I made my way to the second floor to talk with the computer tech people that I was told were in charge of the computers. After reaching out to several individuals inside that office, as well as several individuals outside that office, including my mentor who sent several emails himself regarding the problem, finally, after midterm break, all the computers were working properly.

I do not mean to imply that I had a disastrous first semester because of the two problems I had in room 3029. I feel both the students and I were able to work around them and make the room into a learning environment. In fact, I feel very fortunate that I was even assigned such a room because I know that other instructors, not just at NSU, do not have access to the types of resources that room 3029 has. However, I mean to demonstrate with these two anecdotes why working within a large infrastructure that contains many departments that are often not informed as to what the other departments are doing requires patience and determination. I think my experiences are cause for reflection on why instructors can and should be more involved in classroom design decisions. And, I also think instructors should do their best to heed Selber's advice in terms of being more active in shaping technosocial scenes on campus.

Perhaps, a first step is to make a compromise and experiment with already existing classrooms on campus. Dugdale writes that "Pilot projects for experimenting with different types of flexible learning spaces are important to give faculty the opportunity to test out new settings and teaching



modalities –whether team-based learning, teaching-in-the-round, or some other method” ( 56). Experimenting could lead instructors to question the degree to which classroom spaces influence their choice of pedagogies and lead them to make more conscious decisions about how they use classroom spaces to help students learn.

Perhaps, a part of this first step could be to take advantage of the classrooms that do allow for the movement of teachers, students, and computers, even if it is very little, and to test them out using different layouts. For example, the computer work stations in some of the library classrooms are on wheels and therefore, can move. When unplugged, pushing computers to the side could potentially allow for an open space in the middle of the classroom that could allow for group work that does not require the use of computers. On other occasions, when computers are needed, the instructor could ask students to push computers together in groups so that students can use computers to complete a group assignment. Having a flexible space to work within would be ideal. In “[At First Site: Lessons from Furman University’s Center for Collaborative Learning and Communication](#),” James Inman writes, “If engaged learning spaces are to be democratic and appropriate for diverse teaching and learning styles, then they must have such flexibility.” While in this article Inman speaks about designing his university’s Center for Collaborative Learning and Communication, his insight is applicable to other classroom spaces, particularly those used by many instructors and students. Inman imagines his university’s space as a space that students invent and reinvent depending on what needs to be accomplished that day.

A next step might be for departments to work more closely with the departments on campus who make decisions concerning computer classroom design. For instance, the [Office of Information Technologies](#) at NSU is responsible for providing technological support to the campus community. Their [Technologies Facilities Planning](#) department, more specifically, is responsible for the “design, planning, implementation, and installation process for electronic classrooms, smart classrooms, lecture halls, instructional facilities for specialized applications, and videoconferencing networks and rooms.” Opening up a dialogue and educating each other about our departments’ abilities and needs can potentially affect students in a positive way since we are both working towards the same goal of helping students learn.

While these are just a few small steps, I think they are important and my hope is that instructors, whether or not they belong to special committees that focus on computer issues, will take a more active role in creating classroom spaces, especially if they are to teach in them. Suffice it to say I’m still in pursuit of the perfect classroom. When I try to imagine the future of university life, I sometimes imagine something straight out of a sci-fi movie, where, with a push of a button, or better still, the use of telepathy, I can instantly transform a class space (because they may or may not have walls and therefore may or may not be called rooms anymore) on a daily basis into a space that will meet my needs and my students’ needs. What we accomplish that day in class would be based on what the curriculum demands, not what the space allows. While I think we are quite a long way from changing learning spaces using the push of a button, or telepathy, I don’t think we are too far from a campus where all students will have their own laptops (or other devices) and questions about where to place computers in the classroom will be obsolete. But, until then, each department should be aware of how design decisions are made within the university hierarchy. Each instructor, and department, should work to answer questions such as:

Where, for instance, should laptop tables be placed in classrooms? Should there be a projector and screen? A white board? Should there be a teacher's station and, if so, where? Questions like these will be best answered when everyone in the university hierarchy works together.

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